



**The Map that Named America:  
Martin Waldseemüller's 1507  
World Map**

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**Abstract**

**Editor's Note:** This brief overview of the history of Martin Waldseemüller's 1507 map and its acquisition by the Library of Congress is presented as a complement to John Hessler's article, "Warping Waldseemüller: A Cartometric Study of the Coast of South America as Portrayed on the 1507 World Map" (*Coordinates*, Series A, No. 4). A high-resolution image of the Waldseemüller map can be found at <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3200.ct000725C>.

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In late May 2003, the Library of Congress completed the purchase of the only surviving copy of the first image of the outline of the continents of the world as we know them today—Martin Waldseemüller's monumental 1507 world map. That map has been referred to in various circles as America's birth certificate, and for good reason—it is the first document on which the name *America* appears. It is also the first map to depict a separate and full Western Hemisphere and the first map to represent the Pacific Ocean as a separate body of water. The purchase of the map concluded a nearly century long effort to secure for the Library of Congress that very special cartographic document revealing new European thinking about the world nearly 500 years ago.

Martin Waldseemüller, the primary cartographer of the map, was a sixteenth-century scholar, humanist, cleric, and cartographer who had joined the small intellectual circle, the *Gymnasium Vosagense*, organized in Saint-Dié, France. He was born near Freiburg, Germany, sometime in the 1470s, and died in the canon house at Saint-Dié in 1522. During his lifetime, he devoted much of his activities to cartographic ventures, including the famous world map, a set of globe gores (for a globe with a 3 inch diameter) and, the *Cosmographiae Introductio* (a book to accompany the map) in the spring of 1507; the 1513 edition of the Ptolemy

*Geographiae*; the *Carta Marina*, a large world map, in 1516; and a smaller world map in the 1515 edition of *Margarita Philosophica Nova* among other items.

Thus, in northeast France was born the famous 1507 world map, entitled *Universalis cosmographia secunda Ptholemei traditionem et Americi Vespucci aliorum que lustrationes* (A drawing of the whole earth following the tradition of Ptolemy and the travels of Amerigo Vespucci and others). That map, printed on twelve separate sheets from wood block plates, when assembled would measure more than 4 ½ feet by 8 feet in dimension. The large map is an early sixteenth-century masterpiece, containing a full map of the world, two inset maps showing separately the Western and Eastern Hemispheres, illustrations of Ptolemy and Vespucci, images of the various winds, and extensive explanatory notes about selected regions of the world. Waldseemüller's 1507 map was a bold statement that rationalized the modern world in light of the exciting news arriving in Europe as a result of explorations sponsored by Spain, Portugal, and others—not only across the Atlantic Ocean, but around the African coast and into the Indian Ocean. The map must have created quite a stir in Europe, since its findings departed considerably from the accepted knowledge of the world at that time, which was based on the second century A.D. work of the Greek geographer, Claudius Ptolemy. To us, the 1507 map appears remarkably accurate; but to the world of the early sixteenth century it represented a considerable departure from accepted views regarding the composition of the world. Its appearance undoubtedly ignited a debate in Europe regarding its portrayal of an unknown continent (unknown to Europe and others in the Eastern Hemisphere) between two huge bodies of water, the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and separated from the classical world of Ptolemy, which had been confined to the continents of Europe, Africa, and Asia.

While it has been suggested that Waldseemüller incorrectly dismissed Christopher Columbus's great achievement in history by the selection of the name America for the Western Hemisphere, it is evident that the information that Waldseemüller and his colleagues had at their disposal recognized Columbus's previous voyages of exploration and discovery. However, the group also had acquired a recent French translation of the important work *Insuuper aquattor Amerigo Vespuccii navigationes*, Amerigo Vespucci's letter detailing his purported four voyages across the Atlantic Ocean to America between 1497 and 1504. In that work, Vespucci concluded that the lands reached by Columbus in 1492, and explored by Columbus and others over the ensuing two decades, was indeed a segment of the world, a new continent, unknown to Europe. Because of Vespucci's recognition of that startling revelation, he was thus honored by the use of his name for the newly discovered continent. It is remarkable that our entire Western Hemisphere was thus named for a living person; Vespucci died in 1512. With regard to Columbus's exploits from 1492 forward—i.e. his various explorations between 1492 and 1504—the 1507 map clearly shows Columbus's explorations in the West Indies, and also the Spanish monarchs' sponsorship of those and subsequent voyages of exploration. Shortly after the appearance of the 1507 world map by Waldseemüller, Vespucci was appointed the first Pilot Major in the Spanish House of Trade (the *Casa de la Contratación*) in Seville, and in that capacity was responsible for navigational issues and concerns of Spanish shipping to the new western possessions, across the Atlantic.

By 1513, when Waldseemüller and the Saint-Dié scholars published the new edition of Ptolemy's *Geographiae*, and by 1516, when his famous *Carta Marina* was printed,

Waldseemüller had removed the name America from his maps, perhaps suggesting that even he had second thoughts in honoring Vespucci exclusively for his understanding of the New World. Instead, in the 1513 atlas the name America does not appear anywhere in the volume, and the place of America is referred to as Terra Incognita (Unknown land). In the 1516 *Carta Marina*, South America is called Terra Nova (New World), and North America is named Cuba, and is shown to be part of Asia. No reference in either work is made to the name America. Yet, cartographic contributions by Johannes Schöner in 1515 and by Peter Apian in 1520 adopted the name America for the Western Hemisphere, and that name became part of accepted usage.

A reported one thousand copies of the 1507 map were printed, which was a sizeable print run in those days. This single surviving copy of the map exists because it was kept in a portfolio by Johannes Schöner (1477-1547), a German globe maker, who probably had acquired a copy of the map for his own cartographic work. That portfolio contained not only the unique copy of the 1507 world map, but also a unique copy of Waldseemüller's 1516 large wall map (the *Carta Marina*) and copies of Schöner's terrestrial (1515) and celestial (1517) globe gores. Sometime later in history, the family of Prince Waldburg-Wolfegg acquired and retained Schöner's portfolio in their castle in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, where it remained unknown to scholars until the beginning of the twentieth century when its extraordinary contents were revealed. The uncovering of the 1507 map in the Wolfegg Castle early last century is thought by many to have been one of the most extraordinary episodes in the history of cartographic scholarship. The map sheets have been maintained separated (not joined, with each of the large maps comprised of twelve separate sheets) and that is the probable reason why they survived. The portfolio with its great treasure was uncovered and revealed to the world in 1901 by the Jesuit priest Josef Fischer, who was conducting research in the Waldburg collection. In 1903 an elaborate set of facsimiles of the 1507 and the 1516 maps accompanied by a scholarly study by Josef Fischer and Franz von Wieser appeared.

The Library of Congress's Geography and Map Division acquired in 1903 the facsimiles made of the 1507 and 1516 maps. Throughout the twentieth century the Library continued to express interest in and a desire to acquire the 1507 map, when, if ever, it was made available for sale. Finally, in 1992, the realization that the 1507 map would be sold was revealed to the Library of Congress and specialists in the Library were encouraged to investigate the opportunity. Through the combined efforts of several Library of Congress specialists, and many other members of the Library's staff over an 11 year period, the map has made its way to the Library of Congress. In 1999, Prince Waldburg-Wolfegg notified the Library that the German national government and the Baden-Württemberg state government had granted permission for a limited export license. Having obtained this license, which allowed this German national treasure to come to the Library of Congress, the Prince pursued an agreement to sell the 1507 map to the Library. In late June 2001, Prince Waldburg-Wolfegg and the Library of Congress reached a final agreement on the sale of the map at the price of \$10,000,000. In late May 2003, the Library completed a successful campaign to purchase Waldseemüller's 1507 world map, after receiving substantial Congressional and private support to achieve the terms of the contract.

The 1507 world map is now the centerpiece of the outstanding cartographic collections of the Library of Congress, as it would be for any world class cartographic collection. The map

serves as a departure point in the development of the American cartographic collection in addition to its revered position in early modern cartographic history. The map provides a meaningful link between our treasured late medieval-early Renaissance cartographic collection (which includes one of the richest holdings of Ptolemy atlases in the world) and the modern cartographic age unfolding as a result of the explorations of Columbus and other discoverers in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. It represents the point of departure from the geographical understanding of the world based on Ptolemy's *Cosmographiae* and *Geographiae* to that emerging in the minds of scholars and practical navigators as reports of the "new worlds" of America, southern Africa, and other regions of Asia and Oceania reached Europe's shores. Waldseemüller recognized the transition taking place, as the title of his map notes and his placement prominently of images of Ptolemy and Vespucci, next to their worlds, at the top portion of the 1507 world map denotes. The map now is part of the rich cartographic holdings of the Geography and Map Division, which includes some 5.2 million maps; 75,000 atlases; over 500 globes and globe gores; and thousands of maps in digital form. And from that fragile first glimpse of the world, so adequately described by Waldseemüller in 1507, the Library of Congress' cartographic resources provide the historical breadth and cartographic depth to fill in the geographic blanks left by those early cosmographers.

The Library's acquisition of the Waldseemüller map represents an important moment to renew serious research into this exceptional map, to determine the sources which made possible its creation, and to investigate its contemporary impact and acceptance. The map's well announced acquisition provides us an extraordinary opportunity to appreciate the earliest of early depictions of our modern world. Major segments of this world map have not received the concentrated scrutiny that the American segments have received. The very detailed depiction of sub-Saharan Africa, the south coast of Asia, and even the areas surrounding the Black and Caspian Seas merit further study and discussion in response to obvious questions regarding the cartographic and geographic sources that were available and used by the Saint-Dié scholars to reach their conclusions in the 1507 world map by Martin Waldseemüller.<sup>[1]</sup>

Through agreement with Prince Waldburg-Wolfegg and the government of Germany, the 1507 world map by Martin Waldseemüller is to be placed on permanent display in the Library of Congress's Great Hall area in the Thomas Jefferson Building. The Library of Congress is proud to have obtained this unique treasure and is anxious to have this great cartographic document receive the public acclaim and the critical scholarly inspection that it so rightly merits.

## Note

1. This call for further scholarship on the map, its impact, and the sources used to produce it is not meant to suggest that previous scholarship is lacking. The fine section on Martin Waldseemüller in Robert W. Karrow, Jr.'s *Mapmakers of the Sixteenth Century and Their Maps: Bio-Bibliographies of the Cartographers of Abraham Ortelius, 1570* (Chicago: Speculum Orbis Press, 1993), 568-583, provides a thorough record of Waldseemüller's research output. Elizabeth Harris's "The Waldseemüller World Map: a Typographic Appraisal," *Imago Mundi*, v. 37 (1985), 30-53, is an extensive airing of the date of the printing of the 1507 world map and other Waldseemüller contributions. Works that have increased our knowledge about Waldseemüller and the group in Saint-Dié include: Joseph Fischer and Franz R. Von

Wieser, *Die älteste Karte mit dem Namen Americas...* (Innsbruck, 1903); Silvo A. Bedini's brief article on Waldseemüller in his *The Christopher Columbus Encyclopedia* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 729-731; and Armand P.D'Avezac de Castera-Macaya's *Martin Hylacomylus Waldseemüller....* (Paris: 1867).

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